DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 136 268 CS 203 241

AUTHOR Stanley, Julia P.
TITLE The Lesbian Perspective: Pedagogy and the Structure of Human Knowledge.
PUB DATE 76
NOTE 13p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the National Council of Teachers of English (66th, Chicago, November 25-27, 1976)

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.83 HC-$1.67 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Cultural Factors; Females; *Feminism; *Homosexuality; Linguistics; Literary Perspective; Sex Discrimination; *Social Values
IDENTIFIERS *Perspective

ABSTRACT

The lesbian's perspective, shaped by her experience as an outcast, enables her to shed dichotomies and discriminations learned in the classroom and to seek new ways of interpreting and expressing her perceptions of the world. This paper discusses the "lesbian perspective" from three angles: the unique attributes of the lesbian and her experience of the world, attributes shared by lesbians with other groups of people, and the problem of cultural values and those who subscribe to them. The paper also explores the fields of literary studies and linguistics, in relation to the lesbian perspective. (JM)

****
* Documents acquired by ERIC include many informal unpublished *
* materials not available from other sources. ERIC makes every effort *
* to obtain the best copy available. Nevertheless, items of marginal *
* reproducibility are often encountered and this affects the quality *
* of the microfiche and hardcopy reproductions ERIC makes available *
* via the ERIC Document Reproduction Service (EDRS). EDRS is not *
* responsible for the quality of the original document. Reproductions *
* supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made from the original. *
****

ED136268.

U S DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH,
EDUCATION & WELFARE
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF
EDUCATION

THIS DOCUMENT HAS BEEN REPRODUCED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED FROM THE PERSON OR ORGANIZATION ORIGINATING IT. POINTS OF VIEW OR OPINIONS STATED DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT OFFICIAL NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION POSITION OR POLICY

The Lesbian Perspective:

Pedagogy and the Structure of Human Knowledge

PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS COPYRIGHTED MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Julia P. Stanley

TO ERIC AND ORGANIZATIONS OPERATING UNDER AGREEMENTS WITH THE NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION. FURTHER REPRODUCTION OUTSIDE THE ERIC SYSTEM REQUIRES PERMISSION OF THE COPYRIGHT OWNER

Julia P. Stanley
Department of English
University of Nebraska
Lincoln, Nebraska 68588

*Paper to be delivered at the National Council of Teachers of English, November 26-29, 1976, Chicago, Illinois.

CS 203 241

The title of this paper may suggest that the particular perspective with which I am concerned is a narrow one, and restricted to a minority. While it is true that the "Lesbian perspective" is held by a minority of people, its range is by no means narrow. Since we are concerned here with the effects of the presence of Lesbians and gays in the classroom, what I am calling the "Lesbian perspective" refers to a "turn" of mind that asks questions that are often uncomfortable and unpopular. Yet, as I will try to show, these kinds of questions are not only necessary, but they yield insights into the "human condition" that are not available within the structures provided by other pedagogical attitudes. Ultimately, such questions lead us to redefine what we consider knowledge.

In order to describe the "Lesbian" perspective, I will approach my description from three angles: (1) the unique attributes of the Lesbian and her experience of the world; (2) those attributes shared by Lesbians with other groups of people; (3) the problem of "cultural" values and those who subscribe to them. Although I have called this paper "the Lesbian perspective," easy generalizations about all Lesbians, or all people, are not possible, and I can only present here my perceptions and interpretations as a Lesbian.

The "Lesbian perspective" is that of the outcast, those individuals who, for one reason or another, exist, by choice or force, at the periphery of their culture. It is this dual status of the outcast that influences her choice of perspective. Obviously, Lesbians are not alone as outcasts in our society; in various ways, and to differing degrees, many other people find themselves outcasts: the poor, the physically, intellectually, or emotionally handicapped, those who are born with skin the "wrong" color, those whose bodies do not conform to the prevailing "norm," and so on. The list is virtually endless, and I could make a substantial case for the argument that each of us, in one way or another, is an outcast, that most of us spend some portion of our lives at the

periphery of our culture because of some "blemish," whether it is physical, emotional, intellectual, or a combination of these. The fact of our differences, which our culture defines, judges, and makes painful, is something that few of us are willing to acknowledge, much less act upon as an integral aspect of our lives. (That we find it hard to accept our differences perhaps explains the fact that the phrase, to be in the closet, has acquired widespread usage in our society, meanings beyond its primary reference to the state of being a covert Lesbian or gay.) Yet many of us do spend some portion of our lives as "outcasts," and during these times we contemplate ways of either "adjusting" ourselves to cultural definitions or finding ways of disguising ourselves so that no one will notice our difference.

Put in this way, it is tempting to dismiss cultural stereotypes and the values they represent and enforce as mere myths, and to ignore the tremendous effects they have upon our lives, our self-concepts, and our overt behaviors. Yet, there is a powerful gravitational pull toward these central "myths" in each of us, although we react to this pull in a variety of ways. Our ways of reacting to these myths define us to ourselves and others, and delimit our lives in terms of our relation to our culture. It is our reactions to the defining myths of our culture that place us at the center of our society or at the periphery or boundary. On the one hand, the Lesbian becomes an outcast as soon as she recognizes that she is a Lesbian. In this sense she is "forced" to the periphery of the culture because her existence is not validated by the sustaining cultural myths. On the other hand, if she reacts to her invisibility and lack of validation within the culture, she may choose to ground her identity in her outcast status, affirming herself in a territory that is not acknowledged by the culture. However, even if our reactions are negative, that is, "criminal," none of us is ever completely "outside" of our culture, because even these

negative definitions enable our culture to limit and control our lives. The degree to which we identify ourselves with the central, mythic "norms" of our culture is the crucial consideration in describing the "Lesbian perspective," the Lesbian as outcast.

What, or who, is a Lesbian? The dictionary is not clear:

> 1. A native or resident of Lesbos. 2. The Ancient Greek dialect of Lesbos, belonging to Aeolic, used in the lyric poetry of Sappho and Alcaeus. 3. A female homosexual.

The persistent dictionary reader may then turn to the word homosexual where she will find, between Homo sapiens and homosporous (in the American Heritage), homosexual and homosexuality. As a noun, homosexual is defined as "A homosexual person." Under the word homosexuality, however, we will find the definitions we are seeking.

> 1. Sexual desire for others of one's own sex. Sexual activity with another of the same sex.

By now, of course, we're a long way from the word Lesbian, lexicographically speaking. (The reader really has to want to know what a Lesbian is in our society.) Here we discover that one can be a Lesbian if she feels "desire for others" of her sex, note the plural here, or if she engages in "sexual activity with another of the same sex." (Suddenly it's a same-sex, singular "other.") Whether a woman feels desire for other women or acts upon that desire, she is a Lesbian. Either way, the culturally-determined definition of a Lesbian specifies that the distinctive feature that separates Lesbians from other women is her sexual desire for other women. Now, some Lesbians would accept only the second definition, maintaining that a woman is not a Lesbian until she has actively crossed the border between same-sex love and other-sex love, that

is, until she has engaged in a physical act with another woman. What then, of those women who have decided that they are Lesbians in their minds, but who do not act upon their desire? What of those women who have one sexual relationship with a woman, then get married, and ten years later decide that they're Lesbians after all? Or, what of those women who love another woman but do not, for various reasons, allow that love physical expression? Or, . . . I could go on. Mary Daly has used the sexual definition of Lesbians to distinguish between what she calls "Lesbians below the waist" and "woman-identified women," and I think her distinction is useful, for it bears directly on my description of the "Lesbian" perspective. The term itself hardly matters at this point, since it is more important that we clarify our understanding of its implications. A woman does not come into possession of the Lesbian perspective once she has decided that she is a Lesbian, although the process of recognizing her Lesbianism is certainly central to the Lesbian perspective. On the other hand, a woman may acquire a Lesbian perspective without participating in a sexual relationship with another woman. I am using the term Lesbian to refer to woman-identified women, women whose energies, time, resources, and lives are dedicated to other women. (Although some women (myself among them) would prefer to label the Lesbian perspective as feminist ideology, I will not use that term because some women use feminism in a much narrower sense.)

As I have tried to show up to this point, Lesbians are members of our culture only in a negative sense as members of a category with which women should <u>not</u> identify; therefore our emotional investment in the values of this society are limited by the degree to which we <u>believe</u> that we are members of this culture, or want to be included as members of this culture. Our lack of emotional and intellectual commitment to the given values of our culture makes it easy, and often necessary, for Lesbians to think in ways not defined by our culture, to

think beyond the limits of possibility as such things are handed down to us. To put the statement in its simpliest form, the Lesbian creates herself insofar as that is possible for a social being. Certainly we are not created *in vacuo*; but, to the limited extent that one hears about the existence of Lesbians, such mentions are negative. Lesbianism is not presented to a girl child as a valuable, positive lifestyle she might claim for herself, and most Lesbians, those who know that they are Lesbians, spend some portion of their lives believing that they are the only Lesbian in the world. Our invisibility makes us not only invisible to the rest of society and to each other, but even to ourselves. Accepting a Lesbian identity in this culture requires a conceptual leap beyond the possibilities permitted to us in our culture. The Lesbian then must define herself; each of our positive self-concepts is self-constructed and self-identified, and we must constantly work to reject the negative definitions forced upon us by our culture. Each of us must make and re-make herself in terms that we discover on our own, especially in our early days. The Lesbian, as a cultural alien, has created her own internal structures, and thus is in a better position to see through and effectively challenge the empirical status and desireability of accepted social structures and their supporting concepts because she has no investment in maintaining them as "givens."

While it is true that not all Lesbians possess the "Lesbian perspective," it is equally true that proportionately fewer heterosexual women acquire it, and even fewer males can claim it. To the extent that any outcast must construct her/his own identity by (1) rejecting alternative identities proposed by the culture, and (2) constructing her/his own definitions for her/his lifestyle, that individual moves outside of the conceptual structures perpetuated within the culture. As soon as the Lesbian realizes that the stereotyped behaviors available to her within the culture don't fit her experience, she

can reject them, freeing herself to go beyond culturally-defined boundaries. From this perspective the assumptions that remain unquestioned within the boundaries become apparent to her. In this way, she acquires a view of the culture that challenges its structural definitions. My point here is that a radical perspective is more accessible to Lesbians because we have less invested in the central cultural myths and thus are less bound to their force and the need to continually justify them in our lives. The Lesbian is an outcast, whether she accepts that fact or not. For her, a radical perspective requires only that she become aware of her outcast status and integrate that fact into her conscious actions. It is more difficult for other groups to become radicalized as long as the pre-dominant culture can convince them that there is space for them within the central myths. This is also true of the "closet" Lesbian; as long as she hides her identity as an outcast, it is possible for her to pretend to herself that she is "just like everyone else."

What does an outcast perspective bring into the classroom? Because the Lesbian has already constructed a lifestyle that the culture cannot perceive as a possibility, it becomes possible to gradually shed the dichotomies and discriminations learned in the classrooms of this country. The labels and compartmentalizations that accompany them come to have less and less relevance in her thought processes, and she begins to seek new ways of interpreting and expressing her perceptions of the world. What were once memorized and accepted as "necessary facts" come to have less existence as accurate representations of events and processes, until she realizes that what she has been taught was "real" is a "man-made" construct imposed on events, a ready-made interpretation of thoughts and feelings that can be, and for her, has to be rejected. I am speaking here of a slow, and often painful process, but a process that evolves out of an outcast perspective. If her society defines her as non-existent or irrelevant, and she is capable of perceiving that she

does, in fact, exist, and is, in fact, relevant, other "facts" become increasingly suspect. (In some circles, this process is called "liberation.") During this process, the outcast learns to ask new questions that cannot be asked as long as she remains bound by conventional epistemologies or ways of knowing.

The outcast's pedagogical stance is determined not only by conceptual distance from the prevailing cultural myths, but also by the way in which we incorporate that distance into our lives. The woman who decides that she is a Lesbian becomes an outcast because of her decision. At this point she can try to hide and be accepted within the culture as a "heterosexual," or she can live openly as a Lesbian and declare her outcast status. If she chooses to become an outcast, the implications are far more threatening to the existing social structure, because she is not supposed to exist, and if she does, by chance, exist, she is supposed to want to become heterosexual. (This is called "adjustment.") If she elects to adopt a reformist stance, seeking only to widen society's perceptions of who is to be included as legitimate citizens, as such are defined by the society, the Lesbian will not ask questions that are significantly different from questions asked by anyone else, because she has accepted the social definitions that exlude her as a person. Such a position has its own inherent contradictions. On the other hand, the Lesbian who grounds her identity in her outcast status challenges the most basic assumptions on which most of what passes for "human knowledge" is based: That heterosexuality is the only way for human beings to experience affection; that someone created women in order for them to be dependent on males; that women "need" men (and vice versa); and all the rest of the cultural dichotomies that follow from these so-called facts. Because the Lesbian exists, it becomes clear to her that what most people accept as "facts" are perhaps half-truths, if that. Although in each situation it is the culture that establishes the boundaries of the

outcast with respect to the social structure, it is ultimately the way in which the outcast organizes that information internally with respect to the value of her life that determines her pedagogical stance in the classroom.

If one acknowledges her outcast status, she will be more prone to ask questions that do not rely for their structure on answers provided within the boundaries of knowledge accepted by the culture at large. The data itself exists within the body of knowledge (usually) available to the culture, but the outcast perspective raises questions both about the data as "fact" and about its predominance. In addition, and more importantly, the outcast can ask questions about data that has not been acknowledged within the culture. A familiar instance of this kind of question arose when a Black consciousness began to declare itself, a Black awareness of self as outcast that asked "Why are there no Blacks mentioned in histories of the American Revolution?" As one's outcast awareness grows, gaps in the data of human knowledge become increasingly obvious.

Because we are primarily concerned with the disciplines related to English and the teaching of subjects that have to do with language and literature, I will mention only a few of the questions that I had not raised prior to acknowledging my own outcast status, prior to becoming a feminist. The field of literary studies is perhaps one of the better known areas in which new questions are first asked, and many different questions are being asked from several different outcast perspectives. The questions themselves, and their answers, are often perceived as threatening by those committed to the cultural myths, perhaps because literature is one of the primary instruments for keeping those myths alive. A generation of women critics has begun to ask questions like, "Why are males cast as the 'heroes' in our literature?" "What is the

nature of male 'heroic' action, and how is that action grounded in a corollary definition of 'honor' within the culture?" "What critical function does the label 'confessional literature' serve? Whose interests does it reflect?" Since "confessional literature" is generally attributed to women, the most often cited reason for its literary deficiency is its reliance on personal, experiential modes of expression. The assumption behind the label "confessional" as it is applied pejoratively to the writing of women (but not to that of men) is that such writing is too close to the reality of immediate experience and is thus not abstract enough to qualify as "serious" literature. Awareness of this assumption leads one to ask what, exactly, is the difference between fiction and non-fiction? Is there a difference? If there is a difference, is one then necessarily "better" literature than the other, and if so, why? Finally, if we look at the chronology of literature as it is traditionally presented to us in the schools, we become aware that students are exposed to very few women writers as part of the literary tradition of our culture. The first question is why aren't women included the literary tradition of our culture, the second question is where are the women who were writing during various literary periods, and the third question one must then ask is: If the literature and its values that we have learned from our teachers are primarily male, if women have been ignored and/or excluded from our literary tradition, if the "accepted" literature of our culture focuses on male problems, male concepts, and male actions in the world, then what is the meaning of the phrase "Art for art's sake?" Who could possibly take such an aesthetic seriously?

If we look at language studies the questions are even more overwhelming, but their answers will come less easily, because the discipline of linguistics is relatively new. I'll start with some of the more obvious questions. "Why are almost all grammars of English noun-centered?" That is, why have male

grammarians found it easier to start their analyses of language structure with the noun? "Why are the declensions of Western language characterized as 'masculine,' 'feminine,' and 'neuter'?" "What do these categories have to do with noun declension?" "How do these categories make it possible, perhaps necessary, to then make a distinction between so-called 'grammatical' and 'natural' gender systems in language?" "Why did we lose the male-specific noun wer between OE and ME, and why did males take over the previously generic man to denote their sex as well as all others?" During approximately the same period, why did English borrow, from sources unknown, a maximally distinctive feminine nominative form of the pronoun when the OE he and heo had become homophonous? Why is that distinction so basic to the culture? Why have linguists blandly ignored this anomaly, accepting pseudo-explanations such as Pyles', that the homophony was "psychologically intolerable." Such "explanations" are opaque only if one is already predisposed to accept them as satisfactory accounts of cultural events. If we begin to look closely at the semantic structure of the predicate system in English, possible only when we move away from noun-centered grammars, we realize that verbs like mother and father have very different syntactic distributions. For example, mother can occur with adverbs of frequency, whereas father cannot, e.g., She frequently mothered her children, He frequently fathered his children. A related observation reveals that negative particles mean different things with the two predicates: She didn't mother her children means she didn't nurture them, whereas He didn't father his children has nothing to do with the male's behavior toward the children in the immediate family; the sentence denies that he was physically responsible for their conception. Such asymmetry between two predicates can only be explained on the basis of cultural values and existing social structures.

The questions that it is possible to ask quickly multiply, as I have tried to show, once one accepts a perspective outside the boundaries of knowledge as it is defined by the predominant culture. Once we begin to ask such questions, and to seek answers to them in an active fashion, we have opened up new areas of human knowledge that have not been accessible to us previously. In the classroom, such questions, because they do not have answers, make it clear to students that our knowledge of the world is fragmentary, that we have much to learn yet about ourselves, our culture, and the structure of human knowledge. The outcast perspective makes it possible to ask such questions, and to seek answers to them, and the world is suddenly not the world we have thought it was.

***